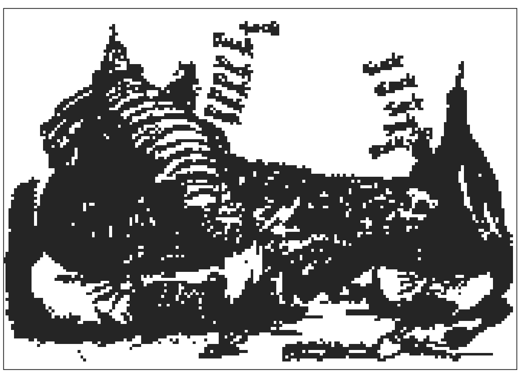
Lifeblood of the Parties

"One Cheer for Soft Money" by Steven E. Schier, in *The Washington Monthly* (July–Aug. 2000), 1611 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Almost no one this election year has a good word to say about unregulated "soft money," that supposedly corrupting sort of moolah that corporations, unions, and individuals are allowed to pour into the coffers of political parties in unlimited amounts. State and local parties then are allowed to use the money only for "election-related activities," including "issue-advocacy" ads, but not (wink, wink) to advance the victory or defeat of individual candidates. Senator John McCain (R.-Ariz.) and other campaign finance reformers urge a complete ban on soft money. But Schier, a political scientist at Carleton College, argues that that would be going too far: Mend it, don't end it.



Unregulated "soft money" is easy to criticize, but funds are needed to strengthen the parties.

Yes, he agrees, *unlimited* soft-money contributions to parties should not be permitted, in order to avoid the appearance of corruption. But the attack on soft money is also an attack on political parties, he argues. And these crucial, already-weakened institutions need to be well funded if their electoral role is not to be further diminished.

Strong political parties perform "vital services for our democracy," Schier maintains. By simplifying and clarifying the voting choice, they encourage broad electoral participation, which is needed, he says, to make those elected more inclined to serve the common interest.

As partisan allegiance to parties has decreased in recent decades, and voter turnout has declined, interest groups have gained members and multiplied, Schier notes, and lawmakers have become more responsive to them. Strong, well-funded political parties can serve as "a 'buffer' between campaign contributions and the government officials those contributions seek to influence. The trick is to keep the money from [going] in such large quantities to parties that the buffer virtually disappears, as it has at present."

He would cap currently unregulated soft-money contributions to political parties at, say, $60,000 a year per contributor. And while keeping the current low limits on "hard-money" contributions to candidates, he would raise "considerably" the limits on hard-money contributions to parties (upping, for instance, the current $20,000-a-year maximum for individuals to $50,000 a year). Doing this, Schier believes, would help "to make our elections more about parties and their philosophies and less about individual candidates and their personalities." He also favors giving national and state parties large blocks of free TV airtime to boost their candidates, and would keep issue advocacy ads by corporations and unions off the air during election seasons. If campaign finance reformers "want robust campaigns and high turnout," Schier says, "they need to learn how to love political parties, not destroy them."

Initiatives for Sale?

"Ballot Boxing" by John Maggs, in *National Journal* (July 1, 2000), 1501 M St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Ever since Proposition 13, the controversial tax-cutting measure that California voters approved in 1978, ballot initiatives have been the rage. All sorts of hot potatoes, from affirmative action to assisted suicide, have been tossed to voters in the 24 states that allow initiatives. In

1998, 61 percent of initiatives passed, including one in Arizona to block the legislature from restricting suburban "sprawl." Veteran *Washington Post* political writer David Broder and other critics fear that the trend endangers representative government.

The ballot initiative "is alien to the spirit of the Constitution and its careful system of checks and balances," Broder warns in *Democracy Derailed* (2000). "Though derived from a reform favored by Populists and Progressives as a cure for special-interest influence, this method has become the favored tool of millionaires and interest groups that use their wealth to achieve their own policy goals." Silicon Valley millionaire Ron Unz, for instance, helped get a successful bilingual-education ban on the 1998 ballot in California, providing $650,000 to promote it. Initiatives, critics contend, bypass the deliberation that should go into the making of laws.

But Maggs, a *National Journal* correspondent, writes that political scientists don't buy the thesis that money rules. After studying 161 initiatives in eight states over six years, Elisabeth Gerber, of the University of California, San Diego, concludes in *The Populist Paradox* (1999) that while "organized interests, especially business interests, now play a greater financial role in the direct legislation process," the big spending does not necessarily pay off. Voters approved only 31 percent of the initiatives funded mainly by "economic interests" (business and professional groups)—but 50 percent of those chiefly financed by "citizen interests" (including wealthy citizens).

Perhaps rich individuals belong in the "economic interests" category because they wield so much more influence than other citizens. "But where to draw the line?" asks Maggs.

The critics, he says, "fail to show that money has been any less corrupting on the alternative they prefer—representative legislatures." And political scientist Shaun Bowler, of the University of California, Riverside, observes that if legislatures really were models of deliberation and thoroughly debated the great issues of the day, then perhaps their abysmal job-approval ratings from the public would go up a bit.

FDR, Fiscal Conservative?

"The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal: Fiscal Conservatism and the Roosevelt Administration, 1933-1938" by Julian E. Zelizer, in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (June 2000), Center for Presidential Studies, Texas A&M Univ., College Station, TX 77843–4349.

When President Bill Clinton embraced the cause of deficit reduction shortly after taking office in 1993, he was not betraying the tradition of New Deal liberalism but

EXCERPT

Moral Federalism

For all the talk of globalization, it matters greatly these days where you happen to live. If you are gay and want recognition of your union with a person of your own sex, it helps if you are a Vermonter. If you are poor and want public assistance to send your child to a private school, you can be thankful if you live in Milwaukee. And if you like having the Ten Commandments posted in your local courthouse, Alabama is the place to be. In the absence of national policy on some of the most contentious issues of the day, America is engaged in an experiment in moral federalism, as state and local governments take sides in the country's culture wars....

Because America requires both a common morality and respect for rights, moral federalism can never be a panacea. Yet when a society is bitterly divided over morality, allowing states and local governments to express different moral outlooks may make a lot of sense.

—**Alan Wolfe**, director of the Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, writing in *The Responsive Community* (Summer 2000)